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Death and Disgrace Insurance for Celebrity Endorsers: A Luxury or Necessity?

B. Zafer Erdogan and Tanya Drollinger

A celebrity endorser can be an effective means of promoting a brand due to the positive meanings that can be shared between the brand and the endorser. However, negative associations toward the brand can also be made if the celebrity breaks the law, or misbehaves in some other way. Death and disgrace insurance is a way in which sponsoring companies can shield themselves financially from a celebrity who falls from grace. Our findings indicate that only 30.8% of advertising agencies always recommend death and disgrace insurance and just over half address morality issues as a part of final contract negotiations.

Key Words: Celebrity, Endorser, Negative, Associations, Death, Disgrace

It has been claimed "advertisements don't just sell commodities, they give meanings to brands" (Myers 1999). Similarly, McCracken (1986) argues that advertising is one of the ways to move meanings from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods. This movement is accomplished by the efforts of advertising agencies that present themselves as professionals capable of understanding meanings and associating them with products. An important conduit of meaning in today's advertising are celebrities who bring a unique set of attributes that are then associated with the brand or company they are endorsing. Professional athletes have been used extensively to bring attributes of health, vitality and success to be associated with a brand (Fink, Cunningham and Kensicki 2004; Mathur, Mathur, and Rangan 1997). For example, Tiger Woods may be one of the most widely recognized celebrity endorsers and engenders these attributes.

There are several widely discussed reasons for using celebrities as endorsers in advertising; celebrities get attention which cuts through advertising clutter, they can polish a tarnished image, reposition an existing brand, introduce a new brand, and/or help global advertising (Erdogan 2005; Kaikati 1987; Miciak and Shanklin 1994). Moreover, empirical studies provide ample evidence that celebrities do get attention and

lead to better recall results for advertisements, effect credibility of advertisers' claims, provide positive attitudes hopefully transferred to brands (Cooper 1984; Fink, Cunningham, and Kensicki 2004; Plopler 1974), and generate greater intention-to-purchase endorsed products (Friedman, Termini, and Washington 1976; Kamins 1989). Although potential benefits of utilizing celebrity endorsers are significant, so are the costs and risks.

While aforementioned advantages of using celebrity endorsers exist, these benefits may become a liability if a celebrity is accused of breaking the law, declines in popularity, receives bad press, or loses credibility by endorsing too many brands (Cooper 1984; Kaikati 1987; Till 1998). A sponsoring company cannot control all of these risks; however, they can guard against several of them as well as the death of the celebrity by purchasing "death and disgrace" insurance. This insurance is usually inserted into the contract of a celebrity endorser and simply provides a means in which the sponsoring company can cancel or withdraw a promotional campaign due to death, disablement or disgrace of the celebrity spokesperson (AIG 2006). This insurance may also cover production costs, certain contractual obligations and expenses incurred to revise promotional campaigns (AIG 2006).

A recent industry article makes a compelling case for buying death and disgrace insurance due to the fact that many times bad press alone cannot be grounds for dismissal particularly if no legal charges are made against a celebrity (*U.K. Times* 2005). If a celebrity is a "fun loving" person and is simply acting within the

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bounds of their character, a sponsoring brand may find it difficult to terminate the contract. A death and disgrace insurance policy can guard against some unacceptable behaviour. Lloyds of London defines disgrace as "Any offence against public taste or decency.... which degrades or brings that person into disrepute or provokes insult or shock to the community" (*U.K. Times* 2005).

Developing a discussion on the inherent risks of using celebrity endorsers as spokespersons for companies or brands in which they share an affiliation is the primary purpose of this paper. Further, an examination of the actual practice on the part of advertising agencies when it comes to the recommendation of death and disgrace insurance as well as discussing morality issues during final negotiations will be investigated. Understanding the practitioner's perspective on celebrity endorsement is a fairly new and growing body of research that is of value since the majority of research has focused on the consumers perspective (Charbonneau and Garland 2005; Erdogan and Baker 2000; Erdogan, Baker, and Tagg 2001; Miciak and Shanklin 1994). Lastly, a case for including a death and disgrace insurance policy in the celebrity endorser contract is discussed with regards to practical implications.

Literature

Presently there is a vast amount of literature available in consumer studies that manipulate celebrity endorser characteristics such as attractiveness, match up, likeability, familiarity, trustworthiness, identification and expertise (Atkin and Block 1983; Basil 1996; Bush, Martin, and Bush 2004; Kahle and Homer 1985; Kamen, Azhari, and Kragh 1975; Kamins 1989; Misra and Beatty 1990; Ohanian 1991; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schuman 1983; Silvera and Austad 2004; Till and Busler 2000). In general the literature has focused primarily on how to create positive celebrity endorsement effects but provides only a few studies on the possible negative effects (Louie and Obermiller 2002; Till and Shimp 1998).

McCracken (1989) theorized that celebrities bring their own culturally constituted meanings to the endorsement process which was later empirically supported by Walker, Langmeyer, and Langmeyer (1992). Unique meanings that celebrities' embody (beauty, success etc.) are transferred to brands that are fairly mundane. Similarly, other scholars have proposed that associative learning theory is useful in explaining the process in which the celebrity's unique attributes are transferred to brands (Till 1998; Till and

Shimp 1998). According to associative learning theory memory can be considered to be a network of various nodes which are connected by associative links (Anderson 1976). The pairing of two stimuli (a celebrity and brand) over a period of time will build a link between the nodes. Till and Shimp (1998) maintain that feelings and or meanings toward a celebrity will transfer to the endorsed brand after repeat exposure to the pairing. Therefore, when someone thinks of Michael Jordan, they may also think of Nike.

The obvious benefit of forming an associative link between the celebrity and brand is that the brand itself can take on a new personality that is much more vibrant than what it possesses alone. The question then arises as to whether or not negative information about a celebrity is then associated with a brand that is being endorsed? Will Kate Moss' recent drug scandal have a negative effect on the perception of the brands she endorses?

In a study on the case of negative information of celebrity endorsers, Till and Shimp (1998) examined the impact of harmful information about a fictitious celebrity (French professional cyclist) on an endorsed product (racing bicycle). They assumed the negative information about the celebrity would damage consumer evaluations of the endorsed brand. Findings showed that subjects who were exposed to the negative information lowered their evaluation of both the celebrity and endorsed brand. The researchers suggested that brands that are unfamiliar or are not well established may be more susceptible to the meanings transferred by celebrities as well as brands that have a long standing relationship with a celebrity.

The cost of employing a celebrity as an endorser can be astronomical (Nikes \$90 million USD contract with Tiger Woods) and the risks associated with it unforeseeable since a sponsor has no guarantee of a celebrity's future actions (Miciak and Shanklin 1994). Moreover, celebrity indiscretion is well known and publicized. Misbehaviour can range from denying the use of an endorser's product (Helen Bonham Carter and Yardley Cosmetics) to criminal charges (Kobe Bryant's sexual assault charges). Given the range of offences, a discussion on the consumers' response to celebrity indiscretion is examined.

Louie and Obermiller (2002) investigated consumer responses to a firm's decision to retain a celebrity endorser who had high, moderate and low levels of culpability for a tragedy (car accident). The authors found that when the endorser had a high degree of blame consumers were more supportive of the company's decision to dismiss the endorser than when they were not as culpable. Findings also suggest

when firms initially hire a celebrity endorser, consumers were more likely to be sympathetic to endorsers who were blameless for a tragedy (Michael J. Fox's Parkinsons disease) and hold more positive thoughts toward the firm than when they hired an endorser who was highly culpable for a misfortune. The authors caution companies to consider the level of culpability of the endorser in the firing and hiring process.

In sum, it is clear that a celebrity's actions effect the derived meanings and when they misbehave their actions are associated with the sponsoring company (Till and Shimp 1998; Louie and Obermiller 2002). Moreover, serious misbehaviour on the celebrity's part should prompt a firm to take action if they want to distance themselves from the celebrity who has fallen from grace. In order to legally and formally break the ties between a company and a celebrity as well as recover financially from the damage, a clause covering death and disgrace insurance in the celebrity contract would be of value. Another but less formal means of reinforcing a sponsoring company's expectations of an endorser is a discussion on morality issues during the negotiations of the final contract. One may ask how actively do advertising agency managers urge clients to invest in death and disgrace insurance as well as discuss morality issues with the celebrity during the final negotiations.

Two Phases of the Study

The study was conducted in two phases, exploratory interviews and a mail survey. Due to the lack of previous research in academic and practitioner literature on the perceived importance of death and disgrace insurance, depth interviews with advertising agency managers were conducted. Several large and reputable advertising agencies were contacted to participate in a study on the use of celebrity endorsers in advertising campaigns.

Phase 1

Initially 23 of the top advertising agencies in the U.K were contacted to participate in the exploratory phase of the study. A convenience sample of ten managers (two chief executive officers, three account managers, two creative directors, a casting manager, and two planning directors) from nine advertising agencies and a celebrity director from the Celebrity Group were interviewed. Faxed responses were also received from two large agencies. All respondents had been previously involved with several marketing communication campaigns involving celebrity endorsers.

At the icebreaking stage of every interview, managers were informed that the research was concerned with any kind of celebrity utilization in marketing communications. Interviewees were asked if they would mind being recorded and all consented. Interviews lasted from half an hour to one hour and a half, but on average took over three-quarters of an hour.

Open ended questions were asked in order to discover practitioners' rationale and strategy for hiring celebrity endorsers. More specifically, questions examined the process of researching potential endorsers as well as the sequence of events that take place in contacting and drawing up a final contract. All of the participants were asked to comment on items that should be included in the final contract negotiations such as death and disgrace insurance as well as the prevalence of discussing morality issues.

More specifically the respondents were asked about the types of concerns or risks that were present in employing a celebrity endorser. Most of the respondents acknowledged that the risks were great both financially and to the reputation of the brand sponsoring the endorser. One manager commented that "they have to be legally careful with celebrities and have to cover all possible outcomes." Respondents generally acknowledged that celebrities come with a high price tag with regards to monetary costs (shooting the commercial, endorsement costs); moreover, they represent a potential cost to the brand reputation if the endorser is involved in illegal or controversial activity.

All of the managers in the sample stated that research was undertaken on the celebrity endorsers in order to determine if they were a safe investment. Both qualitative and quantitative research is carried out to determine whether there is a good fit between the sponsoring company and celebrity as well as the reputation and stability of the celebrity. One manager commented that "you always worry that some scary story will be produced...how he or she abused her children...then your product is potentially at risk and that is a serious embarrassment for the agency and to the client. Quite likely a brand manager will lose his/her job."

In all of the interviews managers indicated that research on the celebrity endorser's reputation was conducted; however, throughout several of the interviews the managers seemed to say, "what we do is try to focus on the safe ones." Celebrities that "won't alienate anyone" or have any "skeletons in the closet." Several of the managers indicated that if a celebrity was "a bit dodgy," then a more thorough investigation was conducted or they were avoided all together. A couple of managers indicated that some celebrities may be given more leeway for misbehaviour. One commented that

"if there was a problem of drug taking by a pop group that would hardly be earth shaking."

In general, research on the celebrities was seen as a safeguard in selecting an appropriate and "safe" celebrity. One of the managers related an experience with a celebrity that was being considered for an advertising campaign and found out that they were a social activist so they were dismissed at the research stage because it would be "an inappropriate (match up) for the client and the product."

Several managers claimed that death and disgrace insurance is an important key for reducing the risk to their clients and that they generally urge them to buy the insurance. "We generally recommend our clients buy death and disgrace insurance which would cover instances in which the ad was pulled due to the fact that the celebrity is up to something controversial or died. It would cover re-shooting the commercial with another personality." Most managers were aware of the insurance and what its purpose was and regarded it as a safeguard to the agency and client.

According to managers, putting morality clauses in contracts is very difficult, yet crucially important for two reasons. First of all, it forces celebrities "to get their act together." Second, it enables agencies to "dissolve deals without any penalty when celebrities mess-up." When celebrities get into trouble, products they endorse are effected negatively. These negative impacts can be partially compensated, although *not prevented*, by buying "Death and Disgrace" insurance.

Phase 2

In the second stage, as part of a larger mail survey on celebrity endorsers in marketing communication campaigns, advertising managers were asked to indicate the prevalence of their recommendation to urge their clients to buy death and disgrace insurance as well as discussions of morality issues during final negotiations of the celebrity's contract. The survey instrument was sent to advertising agency managers and directors that were members of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). These are the leading agencies in the U.K. and account for approximately 80 percent of U.K. advertising expenditures worth £13 billion (24 billion USD) in revenue (IPA 2004). A purposive sampling method with the objective of sampling only agency managers who have been involved in celebrity campaigns was employed. The sampling list consisted of 414 agency managers.

Two waves of questionnaires were mailed with a resulting 131 out of 414 completed questionnaires (31.6 response rate). The respondents were primarily male (66.4%). Over

80 percent of the total respondents had at least 6 years of work experience. The majority of the respondents were Account Handlers (62.6%), then CEOs (15.3%) and Creatives (14.5%). Planners and Producers also participated in the survey. Moreover, 40.5 percent of the respondents had been involved with 6 or more celebrity campaigns at the time of the mail survey.

The IPA regularly categorizes member agencies for purposes of recurring annual surveys as large/medium/small, using income levels (IPA 2004). Agencies with an annual income over £12 million (22 million USD) are classified as Large; between £2.25 (4 million USD) and £12 million are classified as Medium; and up to £2.25 million are classified as Small. For purposes of this research, the two categories, medium and small, were combined since a number of small companies excused themselves from the research due to no prior involvement in celebrity campaigns. Of the total respondents, 36.6 percent were employed in small agencies and 63.4 percent were from large agencies.

Findings

In order to determine the prevalence of agencies that urge their clients to purchase death and disgrace insurance, a question regarding the likelihood of recommending it to their clients was asked. The results indicated that only 30.8 percent of the advertising managers "always" recommend it to their clients and 23.9% often times recommended it (Table 1). Agencies that sometimes, rarely or never recommended the insurance made up 45.3% of the respondents. It was clear from the findings that the recommendation of death and disgrace insurance varied greatly.

During the depth interviews the advertising managers indicated that celebrities came with a large financial commitment and in some cases, the cost of hiring a celebrity may even exceed a small advertising agency's annual billings. This may indicate that celebrity involved campaigns are primarily utilized by large agencies with larger budgets. In fact, an independent samples t-test was conducted on the usage of celebrity endorsers and it was found that large agencies indeed were more likely to utilize celebrity campaigns ($t=2.95$, $p<0.04$). Therefore, we wanted to see if there was a difference between large and small agencies recommendation of death and disgrace insurance.

In order to test if there was a difference between large and small agencies in recommending the insurance, an independent samples t-test was employed. It was found that the large ($x=3.7$) agencies were significantly more likely than small ($x=3.1$) agencies to recommend death and disgrace insurance (see Table 2).

Table 1
Urging Clients to Buy "Death and Disgrace" Insurance

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Never	17	13.5
Rarely	11	8.7
Sometimes	25	19.8
Often	28	22.2
Always	36	28.6
Do not know	9	7.2
Total	126	100

Table 2
T-test Results of Urging Clients to Buy the Insurance and Agency Size

<i>Agency Size</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Mean</i>	<i>Error t-value</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Small	42	3.1	1.23	0.19	-2.01	0.04
Large	75	3.7	1.45	0.17		

Scores are obtained from a five-point Likert Scale in which 5=Always and 1=Never.

Table 3
T-test Results of Morality Issues' Coverage and Urging Clients to Buy "Death and Disgrace" Insurance

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Mean</i>	<i>Error t-value</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
Not Covered	55	3.2	1.3	0.18	-2.31	0.023
Covered	61	3.8	1.4	0.18		

Scores are obtained from a five-point Likert Scale in which 5=Always and 1=Never.

Respondents were also asked if they discussed morality issues as a part of the final negotiations with the celebrity side. To test if there was a difference of practice between managers reporting the coverage of morality issues in final negotiations and managers not reporting this coverage in urging clients to buy death and disgrace insurance, an independent t-test was run. As Table 3 depicts, managers indicating coverage of the morality issues in final negotiations are also more likely to urge their clients to buy the insurance than managers reporting no coverage of morality issues. The difference was statistically significant at level of 0.023. These two significant differences lead the researchers to investigate whether negotiating morality issues differed across agency sizes.

It is clear from the results (see Table 4) that large agency managers are more likely to discuss morality

issues in final negotiations than small agency managers, but the difference is only significant at 0.088 level.

Discussion and Implications

According to the results of the survey data, less than a third of the respondents claimed that they always recommend death and disgrace insurance to their clients. This finding was surprising since the majority of managers participating in the depth interviews indicated that death and disgrace insurance is commonly recommended to guard against financial hazards and risks to the reputation of the brand. However, it may be assumed that advertising agencies place a great deal of confidence in the research they do prior to hiring a celebrity endorser and, therefore, feel more secure about a successful celebrity / client relationship. In

Table 4
Crosstabulation of Morality Issues' Coverage and Agency Size

		<i>Agency Size</i>			
		<i>Small</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Total</i>	
<i>Morality Issues</i>	<i>Not Covered</i>	Count	27	33	60
		%	56	41	46.5
	<i>Covered</i>	Count	21	48	69
		%	43.8	59.3	53.5
	<i>Total</i>	Count	48	81	129
		%	100	100	100
		<i>Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</i>	
<i>Pearson Chi-Square</i>		2.9	1.0	0.088	

all of the depth interviews, the managers stated that they completed qualitative and/or quantitative research on the celebrity before negotiating the final contract.

From the survey findings it is apparent that small advertising agencies in particular are less likely to recommend the insurance when compared to the practice of larger agencies. This finding may be due to the fact that small agencies generally have clients with limited budgets and the request of death and disgrace insurance may seem to be an exorbitant cost and perceived as being a deal breaker. Further, small agencies are also less likely to discuss morality issues from the client's side with the celebrity endorser during final negotiations. From the results one may conclude that smaller advertising agencies may leave their clients more vulnerable to celebrity endorser contracts that go awry.

Buying death and disgrace insurance is not a luxury but a necessity due to the shared meanings that brands maintain with their celebrity endorsers particularly if the endorsement is long running and a strong associative link between the brand and celebrity is made (Till 1998; Till and Shimp 1998). Positive and negative characteristics can carry over to the brand that a celebrity endorses and thus potentially damage brand equity. In essence hiring a celebrity endorser may be quite beneficial in several ways; however, the risks of negative consequences are formidable and should be taken into consideration and even guarded against through a death and disgrace policy as well as a discussion between the client and celebrity as to what is unacceptable behavior. The actual practice of purchasing this insurance, however, may be circumvented by the advertising agencies' belief that they have done a thorough job in researching a celebrity.

Limitations and Future Research

Although U.K. based agencies are well regarded in the global advertising industry, the findings may have limited generalizability due to the fact that the sample for this study was limited to British advertising agencies. Therefore, future research may test the predominance of recommending death and disgrace insurance as well as the discussion of morality issues in the U.S. or Asian advertising circles. Death and disgrace insurance is available world wide, and the implications of negative associations are not bound to one culture. Also, assessing the predominance of morality discussions in the final negotiation stages of the contract would be beneficial in determining if there are differences and the why behind them.

This paper brings to light a current and important issue of limiting the risks to sponsoring companies with regards to celebrity endorsers; however, only limited empirical findings are presented. Although the depth interviews were useful in giving more insight on the role that research on celebrities play, more research is needed in order to determine why there are differences between large and small agencies as well as other underlying reasons that most agencies do not always recommend death and disgrace insurance or engage in discussions on morality issues.

Perhaps one of the most important areas of future research with regards to celebrity endorsers may be a further investigation into the length of the contract (association) and the influence it has on the shared meanings between the brand and the celebrity. Till and Shimp (1998) proposed that companies with a long standing relationship with a celebrity may be most susceptible to negative information. This has

not yet been empirically tested. It would be of value to better understand whether there is a certain number of exposures to the celebrity/brand pairing that create a strong and enduring associative link. Nike, for example, has had long standing relationships with Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Is there a death and disgrace policy in their contracts and would it matter given the length and strength of the relationship?

Lastly, does the type of indiscretion matter? Louie and Obermiller (2002) found that when the celebrity is highly culpable for a tragedy, consumers responded in a positive way toward the company when the celebrity was dismissed. Consumers were more sympathetic to celebrities that had moderate or minor levels of culpability for a tragedy and had negative feelings toward a company that dismissed the endorser. What types of celebrity indiscretion is considered to be tolerable and acceptable versus intolerable and unacceptable? A recent industry article has suggested that brands may use celebrities such as Kate Moss to enhance a more edgy image for their brand (Choueke 2006) and that when a celebrity misbehaves the public may see them as being "human" and thus become more sympathetic to them. A better understanding of the consumers' response to the types of (tolerable and intolerable) celebrity indiscretion as well as their level of culpability would be of value.

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